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ABSTRACT

It has been suggested that for women, success in competitive achievement situations may produce negative social sanctions, resulting in a motive to avoid success, which inhibits high performance in these situations. 120 college women, 60 exhibiting fear of success and 60 exhibiting no fear of success, based upon results of a projective measure, were subjects. Half of each group worked on a task described as masculine, and half performed the same task described, however, as feminine. In addition, part of each group competed against a man, part competed against a woman, and part worked alone. The results indicated that the current instrument for assessing the motive to avoid success is sex-role biased. Further, it was suggested that women perform best on tasks and against competitors who are preceived as compatible with their manifest sex-role orientation. Performance is depressed when these conditions are not met, due to the engagement of the motive to avoid success. (Author/BW)

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Fear of Success, Sex-Role Orientation of the Task, and Competitive Condition as Variables Affecting Women's Performance in Achievement-Oriented Situations

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The research of a number of investigators has described the operation of achievement motivation in diversified populations of male subjects. These data are internally consistent, and have contributed to the general theory of achievement motivation which has evolved to date (Atkinson & Feather, 1966). The empirical findings for women, however, are scarce, ambiguous, and inconclusive (French & Lesser, 1964; Horner, 1968; Lesser, Krawitz & Packard, 1963). The result is that the current theory of achievement motivation largely ignores the dynamics of women's performance in achievement-oriented situations. Even such major theorists as Atkinson and Feather (1966) and McClelland (1961), in works surveying the area of achievement motivation theory, make little or no mention of women.

In 1968 Matina Horner undertook an exploration of sex differences in behavior in achievement-oriented situations. Based upon the work of Freud (1933) and Mead (1949), and upon the fact that women get higher test-anxiety scores than men, she hypothesized that the operation of the achievement motive in women is often confounded by the presence of an inhibiting motive, the motive to avoid success. Horner defined the motive to avoid success as the fear that success in competitive achievement situations will lead to negative consequences, such as unpopularity and loss of femininity. When fear of success conflicts with a desire to be successful, the result is anxiety and the inhibition of achievement motivation.

To determine the presence of the motive to avoid success in women, Horner constructed the following verbal lead, to which women wrote projective stories: "After first-term finals, Anne finds herself at the top of her med school class." A very simple present-absent scoring system was adopted: the motive to avoid success was assumed to be present if the story produced contained fear of success imagery reflecting concern about the success; for example, negative consequences because of the success, instrumental activity away from present or future success, direct expression of conflict about the success, etc. For a complete listing of the scoring criteria, see Appendix A of this handout.

Horner evolved a series of theoretical assumptions concerning the motive to avoid success, its origin, its engagement, and its expression. Because of time limitations, I will not discuss these assumptions here, but refer you to her 1968 work, pp. 22-24, for a complete listing; or to Appendix B of this handout for a partial listing. From Horner's formulations, I derived three experimental hypotheses for study: 1) Women exhibiting a fear of success by Horner's criteria will perform better when working alone than when engaged in interpersonal competition; 2) Women exhibiting a fear of success by these criteria will perform better when competing against another woman than when competing against a man; 3) Women exhibiting a fear of success by these criteria will perform better when the task is described as traditionally feminine rather than masculine in nature. Although Horner's assumptions do not deal directly

with the attributes, behaviors, etc., of women who do not exhibit a fear of success, a sample of these women was included in the present study for purposes of comparison and examination.

It is assumed that the motive to avoid success, like the achievement motive itself, is a stable disposition within the person, acquired early in life along with other sex-role standards. In addition to the aforementioned hypotheses, the present study attempts to investigate more directly the relationship between the motive to avoid success, as reflected in fear of success imagery, and the sex role orientation of the subject. These data were drawn from subjects' responses to a series of rating scale items constructed to measure attitudes toward femininity, marriage and family, professional careers, competition, striving, and personal excellence.

METHODOLOGY

Subjects:

The subjects were 120 college women, ages approximately 18-60, enrolled in psychology classes at Ohio University main campus and branch campuses.

Instruments:

To assess fear of success imagery, Horner's cue sentence, "After first-term finals, Anne finds herself at the top of her med school class," and instructions to tell a story to that cue, were used.

To measure performance on an achievement-oriented task, an

anagrams test consisting of 300 four-letter anagrams, such as esoh-shce, was constructed by the author.

To obtain information concerning sex-role orientation, nine rating scale items were constructed to measure attitudes toward femininity, homemaking activities, professional careers, competition, striving, and personal excellence.

Procedure:

The criterion test for fear of success imagery was given during regular class sessions. Ss were allowed 20 sec. to read the verbal lead, "After first-term finals, Anne finds herself at the top of her med school class," and four minutes to write a story based on that lead. Ss then completed five rating scale items dealing with femininity, marriage and family, and professional careers. All test materials were coded for anonymity. The projective stories were scored for fear of success imagery using Horner's criteria, the presence of any negative imagery reflecting concern about success. Intra-score reliability for 30 women's protocols selected at random was .90 with a score-rescore interval of two weeks.

Within three weeks of the initial testing, 60 women who had exhibited fear of success imagery (hereafter referred to as F women) and 60 women who had not exhibited fear of success imagery (hereafter referred to as S women) were contacted to return for the second testing session. The Ss in the non-competitive conditions were alone with the experimenter while unscrambling the anagrams. In the competitive conditions, subject pairs were in groups ranging in size from 2 to 10. Whenever more than two Ss

were present, at least part of the women were competing against other women and part were competing against men. Ss were seated at tables with plywood partitions in place such that each S could see the person seated opposite (designated as the competitor), but not his work, and could not see the other Ss present while working on the task. In all, 40 women worked alone, 40 competed against other women, and 40 competed against men.

In the conditions in which Ss were working on a masculine task, they were told that the words in the test had been chosen because men typically can unscramble them better than women, probably because of the ability men have in spatial and visual organization, and that the task correlates highly with other tests of masculinity and professional ability. Ss working on the feminine task were told that words in the test were chosen because women typically can unscramble them better than men, probably because of their higher level of verbal skills, and that the task correlates highly with other tests of femininity and homemaking ability.

(Table 1)

Thus I used a 2 x 2 x 3 factorial design, resulting in 12 groups, n = 10 per group.

Ss were allowed 2 minutes/page of 50 anagrams. No S completed any given page within the time allowed. At the conclusion of the anagrams test, Ss filled out 4 more rating scale items, related to striving, importance of personal excellence, and the femininity of competition.

Table 1

Experimental Conditions in the 2x2x3 Factorial Design

Fear of Success	Task	Competitor		
		Man	Woman	No One
F	Masculine	1	2	3
	Feminine	4	5	6
S	Masculine	7	8	9
	Feminine	10	11	12

RESULTS

An analysis of variance for a three-factor factorial design indicated that on the anagrams task, there were no significant main effects for either the presence or absence of fear of success imagery, the masculine or femininine description of the task, or the competitive condition.

(Table 2)

However, the interaction of Fear of Success X Task Description was significant ($p < .025$) and the interaction of Fear of Success X Competitive Condition was significant ($p < .05$).

(Fig. 1)

Fig. 1 shows the interaction of fear of success imagery and the masculine or feminine task description. As you can see, F women, who exhibited a fear of success, performed better when the task was described as feminine, while S women performed better on the same task when it was described as masculine.

(Fig. 2)

Fig. 2 shows the interaction of fear of success imagery and competitive condition. As you can see, F women performed best when competing against another woman, but S women performed best when competing against a man.

The data from the first five rating scale items, administered prior to experimental manipulation, were analyzed using *t*-tests for independent means, comparing F women and S women. F women considered a home and family more important than did S women ($p < .05$). At the same time, S women considered a personal professional career more important than did F women ($p < .0005$).

Table 2

Summary of Analysis of Variance:

Fear of Success Imagery, Sex-Role Orientation of the Task, and Competitor for Performance on Anagrams Test.

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Total	107287.200	119	901.573		
F-S (A)	1190.701	1	1190.701	1.4401	ns
Task (B)	6.535	1	6.535	.0079	ns
Competitor (C)	3151.854	2	1575.927	1.9061	$< .20$
A x B	4440.832	1	4440.832	5.3711	$< .025$
A x C	6282.148	2	3141.074	3.7990	$< .05$
B x C	2882.015	2	1441.008	1.7429	$< .20$
A x B x C	39.118	2	19.559	.0237	ns
Error Within	89294.020	108	826.797		

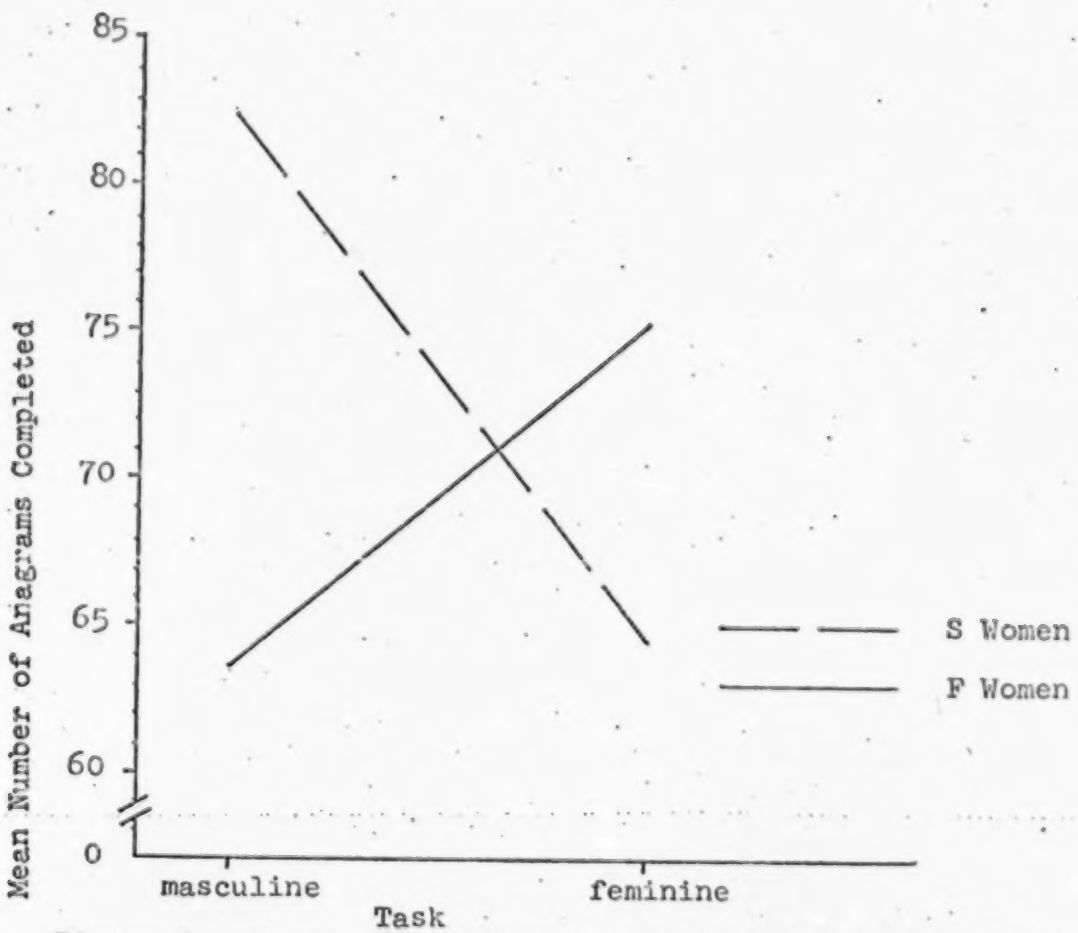

Figure 1. Mean number of anagrams completed by F and S women on masculine and feminine tasks.($p<.025$)*

*It should be noted that on this and all subsequent figures, only a restricted range of all the possible scores is represented. This tends to enhance the magnitude of the effect depicted. In viewing all figures, the statistical significance of the effect should be kept in mind.

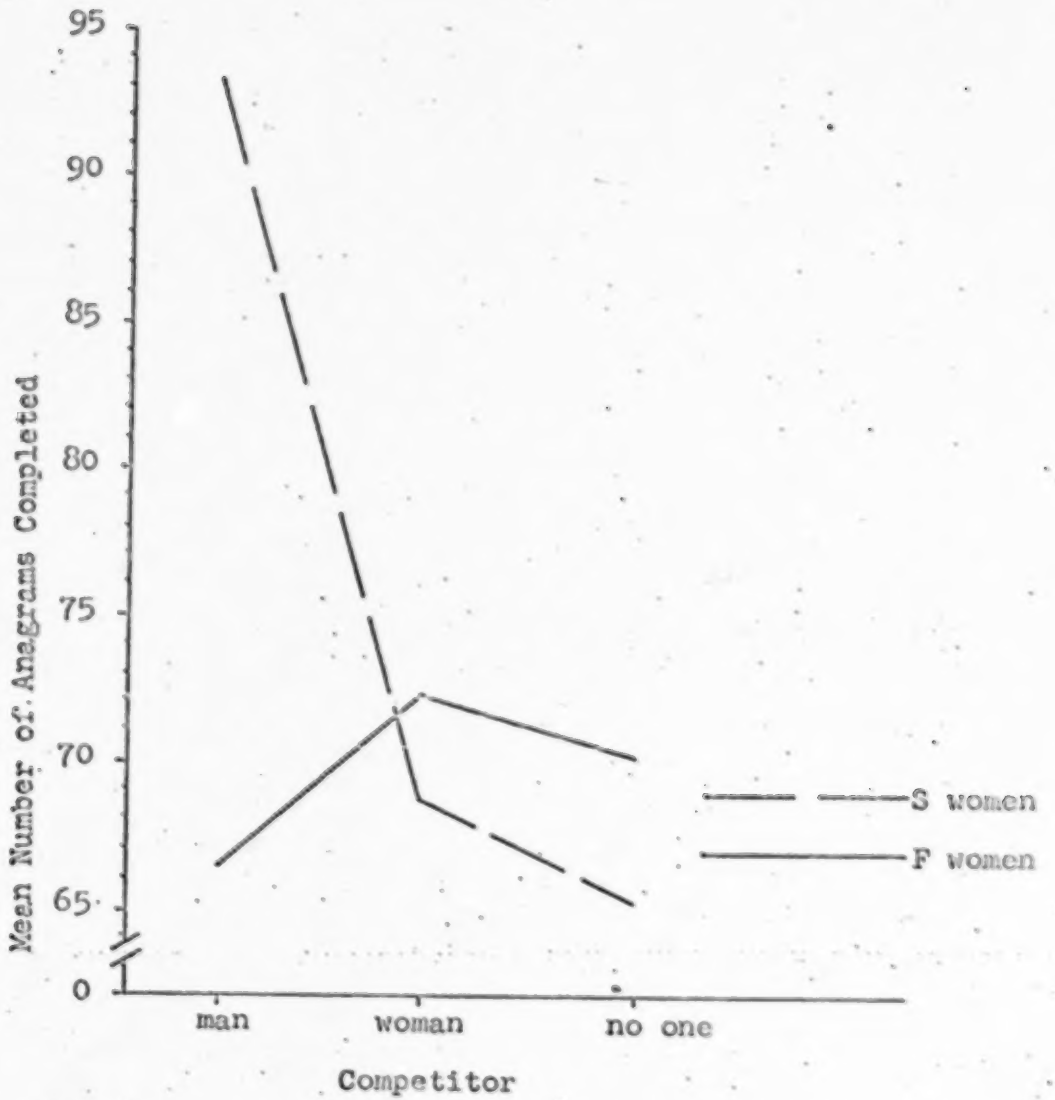

Figure 2. Mean number of anagrams completed by F and S women in each of the competitive conditions. ($p < .05$)

Although both groups of women considered femininity equally important, the S women rated themselves more feminine than did the F women ($p < .001$). Differences in attitudes toward striving, the importance of personal excellence, and the femininity of competition on an unspecified task, measured subsequent to the experimental manipulations, were analyzed using analyses of variance for three-factor factorial designs. There were no significant differences on any of the variables tested.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Concerning the relationship between the motive to avoid success, as assessed in this study, and women's performance in achievement oriented situations, there seem to be five points worthy of note.

One, the results of the present study do not support the contention that competition *per se* is a determining factor in the engagement of the motive to avoid success: women who exhibited fear of success imagery did not perform best when working alone. In addition, when the nature of the task was unspecified, both groups of women rated competition equally feminine.

Two, Horner's assumptions that women exhibiting fear of success imagery would perform more poorly when competing against men and/or on a masculine task were supported.

Three, the present study supported the relationship between the motive to avoid success and manifest sex-role orientation implicit in Horner's assumptions and apparent in her assessment instrument. Women exhibiting fear of success imagery considered a home and family more important and a personal professional career less important than did women not exhibiting this imagery. Thus, the

the manifest sex-role orientation of the former women might be labeled "traditionally feminine" and that of the latter women, "traditionally masculine." It will be recalled that F women performed well on the feminine task and when competing against a woman, but poorly on the masculine task and when competing against a man, while S women performed better on the masculine task and when competing against a man but poorly on the feminine task and when competing against a woman, further supporting this division. (It should be noted that manifest sex-role orientation, apparently, does not necessarily coincide with the importance a woman places on femininity or with her own feelings of femininity.)

Four, the motive to avoid success alone (as it is presently formulated and assessed) is not adequate to explain the behavior of women who do not exhibit a fear of success, but whose performance declines when confronted with a woman competitor and/or a task described as traditionally feminine.

Five, taken together, the results of the present study indicate that women perform best on tasks and against competitors who are perceived as compatible with their manifest sex-role orientations. Performance is depressed when these conditions are not met, perhaps due to the engagement of the motive to avoid success, perhaps due to the failure to engage the achievement motive. The relationships among the achievement motive, the motive to avoid success, and sex-role orientation variables remain unclear and further investigation is definitely called for.

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Appendix A

Scoring Criteria for Assessing Fear of Success

Horner, 1968, p. 105

A very simple Present-Absent scoring system was adopted to fear of success imagery. The stories were scored for Fear of Success if there was negative imagery expressed which reflected concern about the success. For instance,

a. negative consequences because of the success
b. anticipation of negative consequences because of the success
c. negative affect because of the success
d. instrumental activity away from present or future success, including leaving the field for more traditional female work such as nursing, school teaching, or social work
e. any direct expression of conflict about success
f. denial of the situation described by the cue
g. bizarre, inappropriate, unrealistic, or non-adaptive responses to the situation described by the cue

Appendix B

In deriving hypotheses for study, Horner made the following assumptions concerning the motive to avoid success and about the tendency to avoid success (Horner, 1968, pp. 22-24).

1. Motive to Avoid Success is a stable characteristic of the personality acquired early in life in conjunction with sex-role standards. It can be conceived as a disposition (a.) to feel uncomfortable when successful in competitive (aggressive) achievement situations because such behavior is inconsistent with one's femininity, an internal standard; (b.) to expect or become concerned about social rejection following success in such situations.

2. Motive to avoid success is much more common in women than in men. This assumes that being successful in competitive achievement situations is generally consistent with masculine identity and other male goals and not antagonistic to them as may be the case with women.

3. Motive to avoid success is probably not equally important for all women. Fear of success should be more strongly aroused in women who are highly motivated to achieve and/or highly able, e. g., who aspire to and/or are readily capable of achieving success. For women with less achievement motivation or ability, e. g., those for whom success is neither a major goal nor one readily within their reach, there is no reason to feel anxious about succeeding. In approach-avoidance gradient terms, the former women would be much closer to the threatening goal than would the latter.

4. Motive to avoid success is more strongly aroused in Competitive achievement situations where performance reflecting "intellectual and leadership" ability is to be evaluated against some standard of excellence AND against someone else's performance than in Non-competitive situations where competition is directed only against an impersonal standard.

5. Once aroused, the tendency to avoid success, T_{-s}, will function as either (a.) a negative inhibitory tendency acting against the expression of the positive tendency to achieve success which is also aroused in achievement-oriented situations or (b.) as a motivator of defensive responses which can somewhat relieve the anxiety aroused when for extrinsic reasons the T_s must be expressed.

6. The best assumption we can make at the present time about the strength of the tendency to avoid success is to follow the principles used for T_s and T_{-f}, i. e., that the strength of the tendency is a multiplicative function of motive strength, incentive value, and probability of success:

$$T_{-s} = M_{-S} \times I_{-s} \times P_s$$

It is further assumed that the strength of the negative incentive value of success (I_{-s}) will be greater for women in competitive than in non-competitive achievement situations, when their competitors are males rather than females, especially if they are "important" males and when the tasks involved are generally considered masculine, such as tasks of mathematical, logical, spatial, etc., ability.